January 18, 2000

NWM 04.00

MEMORANDUM TO AGENCY RECORDS OFFICERS AND INFORMATION RESOURCE MANAGERS: Bimonthly Records and Information Discussion Group (BRIDG) Meeting on February 22, 2000.

The Modern Records Programs of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) will host the next BRIDG meeting on February 22, 2000, from 10:00 a.m. to noon, in Room 105 of the National Archives Building, 7th and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC. The topic is, "What's the Buzz? - Presenting the NARA Records Center Program."

NARA has launched its new Records Center Program as a reimbursable enterprise. Much progress has been made, and much more remains to be done. Join David Weinberg, the Records Center Program Manager and the Program staff for presentations highlighting where the Program is and where it will be going.

The meeting will also update you on other NARA records management initiatives.

Attached is a copy of the Summary of the December 7, 1999, BRIDG Meeting where issues and initiatives toward improving the SF 115 approval process were discussed. Thanks to all who provided important feedback in that meeting.

To reserve a place for the February 22 BRIDG meeting, please provide your name, telephone number, and number of attendees to Mary Kay Schmidt on 301-713-7110, extension 255, (or e-mail mary.schmidt@arch2.nara.gov), no later than February 15, 2000. Enrollment is limited to 60 participants.

MICHAEL L. MILLER
Director
Modern Records Programs

Bimonthly Records and Information Discussion Group (BRIDG)

10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m., December 7, 1999
Room 105, National Archives Building, Washington, DC

TOPIC: Improving the SF 115 Approval Process

About 75 people attended the December 7, 1999, BRIDG meeting to discuss NARA's interim improvements planned for the current SF 115 approval process. Michael L. Miller, Director of Modern Records Programs, introduced the speakers, made general announcements, and gave an overview of the meeting.

The NARA speakers were Mike Miller, Director, and Bill LeFurgy from the Modern Records Programs; and Marie Allen, Director, Jerry Nashorn, and Nina Frederick from the Life Cycle Management Division of the Modern Records Programs.

General Announcements – Mike Miller

Agency Records Officer memos NWM 02.00 (Five Fast Track Guidance Products Now Available) and NWM 03.00 (Records Center Regulations) have been posted on the web and mailed to records officers. An agreement on Bulletin 99-04 is in the final stages with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). NARA will advise records officers as soon as we have feedback from OMB.

Overview of the Meeting – Mike Miller

NARA is planning three levels of improvements to the current SF 115 approval process:

1.) Interim steps that can be taken right now;
2.) Mid-term improvements that will be implemented within six months to a year from now;
3.) The long-term reinvention of the scheduling and appraisal process, under the direction of Deputy Archivist Lew Bellardo.

What are the Problems? – Marie Allen

The current schedule approval process has a number of problems relating to workload management and dissemination of information. It is important to define the problems before developing solutions.

- Processing Time: The average processing time for a submitted schedule is 330 days from date of receipt to final approval. This time period is too long for many jobs. Some schedules come to NARA with problems that take both time and NARA and agency resources to resolve.

- Backlog: There is a full year's work of unprocessed schedules, some of which are 10 years old. Reasons for the backlog include staff changes, staff shortages, and policy issues.

- Staff Shortages/Time: The Life Cycle Management Division has lost a number of staff members over the last few years. Even with recent hires, not all of the losses have been replaced. Because of other projects and special studies, the appraisal staff have only been able to devote forty percent of their time to appraisal work.

- Schedule Revisions: Schedule revisions are an ongoing process. Revisions can range from minor changes that can be solved over the telephone to major redrafting that involves visits to agencies by appraisal staff.

- Internal/External Review: The internal and external review process of a submitted schedule takes time. Outside of internal concurrences, the external review takes almost four months, which includes publication of the schedule in the *Federal Register* and an extended public comment period for jobs with high reference and public interest.

- Customers need information about process and status: Customers may not have enough information about the schedule review process to know the status of their submitted schedules. This may be solved through a process of regular communication and reports from each agency's appraisal archivist.

After reviewing the problems with the current scheduling process, Marie Allen went on to explain how the scheduling review process works. Some of the steps can be taken concurrently.

Schedule Review Process

1.) Receipt and date stamp
2.) Initial review
3.) Register in tracking system
4.) Acknowledge receipt of schedule via postcard or e-mail
5.) Review by appraisal archivist (which can be a short or long process)
6.) Draft appraisal report by appraisal archivist
7.) Review and concurrences obtained from internal stakeholders
8.) *Federal Register* review steps:

20 days	to prepare/route *Federal Register* notice to be signed and get it published in the *Federal Register*
45 days	to request a copy of the schedule and appraisal report
30 days	for requester to submit comments on schedule/appraisal
15 days	for NARA to review comments
110 days	**total for Schedule Review Process**

9.) Assemble SF 115 and route for signatures
10.) Package signed by the Archivist
11.) Transmission of copies to records officers

Following the discussion of the schedule review process, records officers asked questions and offered the following comments.

- Records officers indicated that posting the schedule review process timeline on the web would be very helpful to them.

- When a General Records Schedule (GRS) item is withdrawn, agencies would like NARA to work with them to develop a template or an alternative to smooth the transition from one schedule item to another.

- Someone asked about what NARA is looking for in good schedules. What are the "fatal flaws" in a submitted records schedule that would cause NARA to reject it?

- Records officers need better information on the format that NARA requires. They also want a sense of how many people need to approve the schedule. Marie Allen responded that she is working to end the serial review and concurrence process for schedule approval and to get people to reach consensus through in-person discussions and informal contact. Shortening the time for informal review among NARA's internal stakeholders has already reduced the length of the schedule approval process.

- Another person commented that the General Records Schedules are helpful to agencies, and they would like to see more such schedules, particularly on environmental issues. The Targeted Assistance program may help to develop partnerships with agencies to create more GRS items.

- Records officers asked for a sense of workload time frames and said that NARA should be accountable to agencies regarding the status of submitted schedules. Agencies would like to be able to access the status of their SF 115s from the NARA web site. Someone suggested that some concurrences could be concurrent instead of sequential. Marie Allen noted that the internal NARA review and the *Federal Register* process are now concurrent. The internal review period has been shortened to 15 working days, and the requests for signatures are all sent at the same time. Through the use of e-mail, the concurrence process is also faster than in the past. While it is not currently possible for agencies to access the schedule tracking system at NARA, appraisal archivists send quarterly status reports to agencies that request the reports.

Interim Improvements – Marie Allen and Jerry Nashorn

Marie Allen proposed a number of steps that NARA can take now to improve the scheduling process.

- Reduce processing time for easier jobs. Due dates are now assigned for all new schedules, with deadlines of 180 days for schedules that do not require extensive review. The length of the processing time depends on the size of the schedule and the complexity and type of records involved.

- Reduce and eliminate the backlog of previously-submitted schedules. NARA has reduced the backlog of previously-submitted schedules by 62 percent over the past 18 months. The staff hopes to have 75 percent of the old jobs resolved by the end of FY 2000.

- Withdraw jobs that cannot be processed. NARA is actively reviewing the workload and will send unprocessable schedules back to the agencies for revision.

- Prioritize extensive revisions. NARA is working with agencies to prioritize the schedules that are most important to them. The Targeted Assistance program will provide additional assistance in this area.

- Expedite internal review. NARA has cut the internal review time in half and encourages concurrence through e-mail and consensus by stakeholders.

- Increase staff and staff time. Several positions have been posted for the Targeted Assistance program. Appraisal archivists will spend at least 60 percent of their time on appraisal jobs.

- Provide status reports. Appraisal archivists will provide quarterly status reports with specific data to agencies that request them.

Jerry Nashorn spoke about how well-prepared SF 115s can expedite the schedule review and approval process. He noted that components of a good schedule are spelled out in the *Code of Federal Regulations* (36 *CFR* 1228.24-.32) and in chapter five of the *Disposition of Federal Records Handbook*. Nashorn discussed two schedules that were particularly good and said that they were able to be expedited because they contained clear descriptions and disposition instructions. Specific elements of a "good schedule" include:

- Clearly written series description that includes the record types, the purpose of the series, and/or function of the records

- References to superceded schedule items and an explanation of the proposed change(s) in disposition instructions

- Clear disposition instructions, including cut-off instructions and instructions on whether or not records will be retired to inactive storage

- Disposition instructions for related e-mail and word processing files

- For schedules covering electronic systems, disposition instructions for input documents, outputs, and documentation as well as master files

Mid-term Improvements – Bill LeFurgy

Bill LeFurgy then spoke about potential mid-term improvements of the current process over the next year. He noted that these ideas need to be discussed with customers to verify their usefulness and to flesh them out. Suggestions for additional ideas are also welcome.

LeFurgy said that two areas are the current focus for mid-term improvements: 1) improve the quality of incoming schedules, and 2) identify ways to reduce the scheduling burden on agencies and NARA.

1.) Improve Quality of Incoming Schedules

- Identify and address the most common problems with schedule preparation to reduce or simplify interaction between appraisal archivists and agency records managers after a schedule is submitted.

- Explore methods to improve the overall quality of submitted schedules so that they can be processed more quickly. Potential methods include development of model schedules or schedule templates; improved training; more examples of best practices; and expanded guidance.

- Test ways to make schedule submissions more useful and easier to process. Possibilities include giving agencies the option of providing electronic copies of schedules as well as additional information about the records they cover (such as documentation for electronic systems, for example).

2.) Identify Ways to Reduce the Scheduling Burden on Agencies and NARA

- Is it possible to change scheduling approaches and/or processes to reduce the workload? Assuming there are, what methods could be used? Are current scheduling requirements more difficult than necessary? What might be simplified or eliminated?

- Look into developing new guidance that could make scheduling easier to do.

- Investigate methods to reduce duplication of effort, such as joint agency development of schedules or use of model schedules, such as for environmental records.

LeFurgy asked for additional suggestions, either during the meeting or later via phone or e-mail. Some of the suggestions made during the meeting are summarized below.

Records officers suggested that NARA could improve communication with agencies by:

- Using more model manuals (examples can be accessed at http://ardor.nara.gov/).
- Placing the GRS on the web site as a single word processing document.
- Making schedules into a template form to automate the process.
- Building a web site to walk people through the basic steps of the process.
- Relating schedules to the *U.S Code* and the *CFR*,
- Providing both good and bad examples of SF 115s.

Records officers also suggested that NARA could help them improve the quality of incoming schedules by:

- Simplifying the GRS into larger categories,
- Developing a GRS on Government Performance Review Act (GPRA) records.
- Providing guidance on describing permanent records,
- Posting the *Code of Federal Regulations* on the web. (The *CFR* is available at http://www.nara.gov/nara/cfr.html. Records management regulations are in Subchapter B.)

Other Issues Discussed

Best Practices – Nina Frederick

Nina Frederick explained the Best Practices Award, which was first awarded in 1998 at RACO. The Patent and Trademark Office and the Bonneville Power Administration won in 1998, and the Environmental Protection Agency and the Office of Government Ethics received the award in 1999. Agency records officers may nominate their own agency or other agencies for the award in five areas of records management:

1.) Records management inventory and scheduling
2.) Records management training and promotion
3.) Management of electronic records
4.) Innovative use of technology
5.) Overall general improvement in a records management program

Nominations and justifications are due to Nina Frederick by March 1, 2000. She explained the review process and noted that the Archivist of the United States makes the final decisions. The award will be presented at the next RACO conference, which will take place on May 23, 2000, at the International Trade Center in Washington, DC.

Further information about RACO 2000 can be found at http://www.nara.gov/records/racofl.html. The conference fee is $150, and agencies may use credit cards to make reservations with Marva Frazier at 301-713-7100 x264 or by e-mail at marva.frazier@arch2.nara.gov. Further information about the Best Practices Award is available at http://www.nara.gov/records/comm.html#bestpractice.

We Need Your Input – Mike Miller

There are currently four opportunities for agencies to offer feedback on records management initiatives

1) A draft information technology (IT) schedule will be reviewed in January. Records officers and members of their IT staff are needed to comment on the schedule

2.) NARA has formed an interagency workgroup to develop guidance on Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) issues. The working group needs knowledgeable people to review its products.

3.) NARA will also organize a group to brainstorm implications for records programs if retention periods for schedules in general were changed from mandatory to minimum.

4.) NARA would like suggestions on the best way to get input from the records management community. Forums might include working in small group meetings, focus groups, and networking lists.

Wrap-up – Mike Miller

NARA welcomes agency input and feedback. Anyone interested in participating in any of the above groups or providing feedback on the various issues may contact NARA's records management staff at records.mgt@arch2.nara.gov.